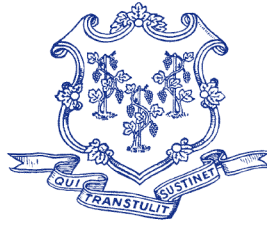


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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
Senator Martin M. Looney
March 11, 2015

In Support of S. B. 1058, An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism

S.B. 1058 is intended both to help Connecticut students and to help our state close its achievement gap by identifying school districts and individual schools with unacceptably high rates of chronic absenteeism. The bill requires these districts to then set up a process to determine the causes of this absenteeism specific to that district, or to the individual school, and develop a plan to address those causes. The bill also requires SDE to support local districts and schools in this critical endeavor.

Chronic absenteeism in our schools is a situation that Connecticut urgently needs to address. Recent studies have indisputably and directly linked chronic absenteeism with the achievement gap. Students who miss significant amounts of school are more likely to fall behind and stay behind. Chronic absenteeism has been linked with lower academic performance and lower graduation rates.

Absenteeism can be caused by a number of factors, including but not limited to student mobility, family crises and financial hardship. It can be attributed to housing issues, student hunger and poor health. Finding the causes of this absenteeism -- on a school by school, district by district and then child by child basis -- is critical to addressing how to fix the situation.

Based on recent, excellent work by SDE, chronic absenteeism in Connecticut appears to be concentrated in certain districts where poverty is more prevalent. For example, according to SDE, during the 2013-14 school year:

- New Haven had a 24.7% chronically absent rate for the district. In its High Schools the rate was 37.3%;
- Hartford had a 25.7% chronically absent rate for the district and 38% in its High Schools;
- Bridgeport had a 21.3% chronically absent rate for the district and 32.5% in its High Schools;
- Glastonbury had a 2.8% chronically absent rate for the district and 4.6% in its High School; and
- Greenwich had a 4.7% chronically absent rate for the district and 4.5% in its High School.

Further, according to SDE, in Connecticut:

- Students eligible for free lunch are three times as likely as their peers who are not eligible for lunch subsidies to be chronically absent;
- Black/African American students are about twice as likely and Hispanic students are more than twice as likely as White students to be chronically absent;
- English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities also evidence substantially higher chronic absenteeism rates when compared to their general education peers;
- Chronic absenteeism rates are higher in urban districts;
- Education Reform Districts in the aggregate have a chronic absenteeism rate of over 20%;
- 24% of all chronically absent students reside in these 10 Education Reform Districts; and
- 36% of all chronically absent students reside in the 30 Alliance Districts (this includes Education Reform Districts).

SB 1054 bill also proposes another unique approach to addressing chronic absenteeism. The Cities of Waterbury and New Haven have piloted a program to get our Regional Children's Probate courts involved in the process of stemming chronic absenteeism and truancy. In these two cities, schools have an option of referring students who are either truants or in danger of becoming truants, along with their families, to special clinics (in Waterbury, the clinic is called the "Truancy Clinic") that have been established by the two Children's Probate Courts serving those cities. Through these clinics, the children's probate judge becomes involved with the family to find the root cause of this absenteeism. These two programs, while still fairly new, have by all reports been exceptionally effective. SB 1054 would expand the eligibility for establishment of such clinics to the Children's Probate Courts serving each of the Alliance School Districts, and give the schools in such districts the option of referring students to any that are established. From a bill drafting perspective, I wanted to request one change to this section, which was reflected in the original proposed bill. Because most – but not every -- Alliance District(s) is served by a Children's Probate Court (there are only 6 of these specialized courts throughout the state), the original proposal allowed the regular Probate Court serving each Alliance District not served by a children's court to begin a Truancy Clinic of its own.

I urge you to support these two bills, which together can help to decrease the achievement gap afflicting our public schools. Thank you for your consideration.